

RAGS, SACKS, AND BOTTLES.

He wore a broad-rimmed hat, and his hair was long, and his whiskers bushy. He was a small man, and drove a mule that was also small, and so old that the memory of its youth must have been the merest shadow. The wheels of the little old cart were so loose on the axles that they would get themselves into the most unaccountable positions, sometimes lurching so far to one side or the other that wreck seemed inevitable. On such occasions, which were always unexpected, the little man had to lean the other way.

“Rags, sacks, an’ bot-tels!”

Whoa, Beauty! Wonder what this gentleman wants. Want to sell some rags, sir? No? Could I ride with him? No use stoppin’ a fellow—a business man—fer sech a question ez that. In dead earnest? Well, well, well, well! Ef that didn’t beat him all holler. A fine, dressed-up gentleman a-ridin’ through the streets in sich a fake ez that there cyart—why, the boys ‘ud guy me out’n my senses.

“Rags, sacks, an’ bot-tels!”

Well, jump in, then, ef I *would* like ter hev a lift. Mebbe I was tired o’ walking.

“Rags, sacks, an’ bot-tels!”

He had a curious assortment of wares in the cart; under his feet, under the board that served for a seat, everywhere, mixed and mingled; gunny-sacks filled with strange things; a box for bottles, and cups with the handles knocked off; fragments of looking-glass; dainty old shoes run back at the heels and burst at the toes (he imparted to me in strict confidence the name of the young lady who had worn them—a great society belle); riff-raff and scum of finery, flimsiness, and poverty—a very curiosity-shop of exhausted economy and impatient extravagance gone to waste.

“Rags, sacks, an’ bot-tels!”

It was the most doleful chant I ever heard. It employed but two notes, which he always struck with exact precision. There was no reference to a tuning-fork, nor clearing the throat, nor testing the vocal organs by running up and down the scale. The burden of the chant was on the key-note, the only variation being the dropping to the fourth on the first syllable of “bottles,” and then resuming the old position in the scale on the last syllable. This gave the word a strange sound, and I did not recognize it; so I inquired its meaning.

“Bottles,” he replied, looking surprised and somewhat contemptuous.

There were ale bottles and whisky bottles; a bottle the baby had used; bottles from the Rhine and Bordeaux; square bottles and round bottles; long bottles and short bottles; bottles of every nationality and pedigree; lean bottles and fat bottles; bottles with druggists’ labels, and bottles without labels; dirty bottles and clean bottles—a ragged and hungry army of bottles that had been through many struggles, and that were destined for many more; bottles of strong principles, and bottles whose characters were so frail that they would crumble under the least touch of calumny or adversity—the fag end of all the disreputable bottles in creation.

“Rags, sacks, an’ bot-tels!”

I noticed his keen little eyes carefully and rapidly scanning upper-story windows, throwing a quick glance into alleys leading into back yards; and the comprehensive look with which he regarded a clothes-line, with its burden fluttering in the wind, conveyed whole volumes of analytical discrimination.

Whoa, Beauty! He had caught a signal from a back stair, given by an untidily dressed, though good-looking, matron. Beauty came so suddenly to a dead halt that the cart wheels, which had been running peacefully along at a considerable inclination to one side, lurched over to the other, as if they wanted to rest themselves by standing on the other leg, and threw me violently against the little man.

“The streets,” he said, in an apologetic tone, “is skimpety like, an’ yer can’t jess calkilate when you’re a-runnin’ a-foul of a rut.”

The good soul! It was the crazy old cart that was at fault; but he would hide its infirmities, even at the expense of truth.

“Will yer set in the cyart,” he said, “an’ hol’ Beauty ‘gainst I come back? She’s mostly purty gentle, an’ moun’t run away; but she gits lively ‘n strong at times, an’ hez notions of her own, jess like a woman.”

Beauty run away! Why, I have no idea such a thought had found place under her thick old skull for a quarter of a century.

As I awaited the return of the little man, my attention fell upon the patient and decrepit disguise of anatomy that stood so quietly in the patched and spliced shafts of the cart; and I

could not help thinking that Beauty was made entirely of rags, sacks, and bot-tels. Her brown hide, patched and torn, and covered with the filth of the stable where she had lain, looked more like a sack than anything I had seen before. I was sure her ears were the dilapidated shoes of some broken down song-and-dance man, whose trumpery had gone to the rag-picker. I speculated considerably on what the old sack was stuffed with, and was forced to the conclusion that the great prominences all over her emaciated body were bottles; that the jagged ridge along the back was propped up by soda-water bottles, with the necks broken off; and there was no doubt in my mind that the lumps at the hips were Dutch bottles that were cracked, and fit for no other use. What kind of rags was Beauty stuffed with? A problem. But I thought the poor old stomach contained only rags that the junk dealer had refused—such as half-wool stockings, worn out at the heels and toes; old red-flannel rags, and rags that were mildewed and rotten; rags that had been rags for three generations, and sold because a stitch would no longer hold them together. Ah! but what kind of a soul had Beauty? Was it, too, made of rags, sacks, and bottles?—or was it woven of fine white thread? I think not the latter, but rather that it was composed of rags that had served for blisters, poultices, and ointments; rags from which all life and color had faded, leaving them blank, but white, for all that; rags that had felt all the privations to which rags can be subjected, that had been torn and tattered by the winds, left uncleansed all their natural lives, and that the rats and mice had eventually stuffed away in damp and dismal places to make nests of; rags that had served as handkerchiefs to conceal a sigh, or brush away a tear. There were sacks in the soul, too—empty dreams of emptier oat-sacks; and bottles in which flowers had been put, and left to wither when the water dried up.

"Rags, sacks, an' bot-tels."

The little man came out of the gate, lugging a sack full of rags and bottles. He deposited his burden in the cart, opened the sack, peered into it, buried his arm in its contents, and fetched up an empty bottle. This he deposited in the box, and repeated the operation until he had taken out all the bottles, leaving only the rags.

"Are rags dear?" I asked.

"Oh," he replied, with a shrug, "a business man can't growl about trifles, you know. Them rags'll weigh 'bout ten pounds."

"How much did they cost you?"

"Well, yer see, people wants all the money they kin git. Them people in there's mighty close." And he added, with a knowing look,

"There's queer stories about 'em. An' then, times is purty close. They wanted twenty-five cents for 'em, an' kinder stuck to it like; but I warn't on the buy thet strong, an' when I got 'em down to fifteen cents, I tuck 'em."

As we jogged down the street, he continued his cry:

"Rags, sacks, an' bot-tels."

The house from which we had just made the purchase was apparently that of well-to-do people. There was neatly trimmed shrubbery in the garden, a smooth grass-plat, and flowers. The handle of the door-bell was silver-plated. My fancy clung to that house, with its slovenly matron, stood upon the door-step, on which was a mat bearing the word "Welcome," turned the handle, and entered. Then I found a rug at every door, but they were all woven of rags. There were rag carpets everywhere. Underneath the spotless white bed-spreads were quilts made of odd bits of cloth and rags from unimaginable sources. I was so disheartened in the search for something new, and fresh, and whole, that was hidden from outer sight, that I went down into the hearts of these people to find, perchance, a single thing that was not torn, and tattered, and empty; but a great night-mare there confronted me. It was a scare-crow, dressed in rags that it had worn so long they were falling off by piecemeal, exposing a frame that was warped and awry; that was split where the nails had been driven into it, and that was tied up with odds and ends of strings, and leather thongs cut from old boot-legs. Terrified with the spectacle, I hid myself in the innermost closet of that slovenly matron's (the mother's) heart, and there I was blinded by cobwebs and choked by dust. I stumbled upon a heap of ashes in a very dark corner. They enveloped me in a cloud. I was suffocating, and gasping for breath, when I was borne down into the ashes by a heap of rags, sacks, and bottles, that fell from above, and crushed me with the weight of a mountain. Struggling madly, I fought my way out. I gained the top of the mountain, and clambered down the side. I fell over something as I turned to leave. The darkness was oppressive, the dust suffocating. I felt at my feet in the utter blackness, and found, grinning, and ghastly, all dry, and parched, and shriveled, and whitened—a skeleton.

"Rags, sacks, an' bot-tels."

We did a driving trade that day. All the rags, sacks, and bottles in the town seemed to flock to us as to a haven of rest; for they must have known that a great future was opening up before them, in which, purified and transformed, they would come to occupy higher positions in  and serve nobler purposes. But we drove

terribly hard bargains, and sometimes exhibited a meagerness of soul that was contemptible. It must be understood that we could not avoid this; for did we not have at home five or six little empty, tow-head bottles, that had to be filled so often? Did we not have five or six little bundles of rags that *would* shiver, and that *had* to be kept warm? And we loved them, even if people did say we were mean and hard-hearted; even if dogs did growl at us; even if we were cursed, and kicked, and driven out of back yards, drenched with dirty water the kitchen-maid had thrown upon us. But this occurred only once, and then there happened to be a silver spoon in the bottom of the dish-pan. It struck us scornfully, and fell to the ground, and we very slyly and very quietly put it into our pocket.

"Rags, sacks, an' bot-tels!"

The day's work was finally done, and the little man turned Beauty's head homeward. His business-like look went out, giving place to one of sadness and anxiety.

"My little girl is very sick," he said.

"Ah!"

"Yes, very sick. Most afraid she won't live long."

I accompanied him home. His house was a miserable hovel, with neither floor nor chimney. The furniture consisted of a broken table, an old chair, and a quantity of rags spread in the corner for a bed. The little man approached the bed, and, with womanly tenderness, stooped down and kissed a little bundle of rags almost buried in the pile.

"How is my little Mag?"

A wan, thin face smiled, and a weak voice replied, as two emaciated little arms sought his neck:

"Oh, papa, I'm *so* glad you've come. Give me some water, papa."

The little man held up her head, and she eagerly swallowed some water from a broken bottle.

"I've been so lonesome, papa—so lonesome. They all went away and left me, and a great big rat got on the bed."

"Where is the mother?" I asked.

"Dead," he replied.

I approached the little sufferer, took her tiny hands in mine, and found them cold. I kissed her forehead and lips, and found them hot. An indefinable horror was stealing over me, as if I stood in the presence of something invisible that was repulsive to nature.

"Papa," she said, "did you bring me any pretty rags?"

"Lots of 'em, Mag, lots of 'em. Whole heaps of 'em."

"Let me see 'em, papa. And—and will you make me a pretty rag doll?" she asked me, hesitatingly. "Papa can't make 'em as pretty as I can, and I am so weak I can't make 'em any more."

Her poor eyes sparkled as I rummaged the sacks for the finest and brightest rags, and made them into a very princess of rag dolls. She clasped it to her breast, and kissed it again and again, and laughed some, and cried some, and called it pet names, and said it was the prettiest doll she ever saw. Then she kissed me, and laughed and cried again. I asked her if she wanted something nice to eat, for I was prompted to this by the dreadful feeling that I could not understand. She shook her little flaxen head slowly, but sadly.

"Wouldn't you like a nice, big, round orange?"

A great, hungry eagerness came into her eyes, and the pale little face slightly colored.

"Oh!" she said, "an orange. I never tasted but one."

Somehow my eyes became so dim that I turned away, and discovered the rag-picker quietly crying. Then the truth came upon me, and overpowered me. There lay before me, on the bed of rags, a human being, drifting away. While church spires pointed proudly to heaven; while there were people in the world with generous but ignorant impulses; in the broad light of day, when the birds were singing, and the sun shining brightly; in the fullness of time, and by the grace of God; at the very footstool of the Throne in heaven, lay that little mortal dying—of what? *Starvation*.

Was I already too late? I rushed from the hovel, stunned and staggering, looking for Life; and, ringing in my ears, rousing every energy, was the solemn, funeral, heart-breaking cry:

"Rags, sacks, an' bot-tels!"

That was ten years ago. The little man and Beauty have long since passed away. My ward has just grown into lovely womanhood, pale, thoughtful, beautiful. I cannot imagine why the other boarders look at each other and smile when I kiss Mag "good night," and when she turns at the door, and throws me a kiss, with her eyes full of pure affection. But, somehow, the world is brighter than it used to be. I am greatly mortified to find a few gray hairs in my head, for I am afraid people will think I am getting old. I am told that I am much more careful with my dress than I was a few years ago. I am sure I feel younger than I did ten years ago. Those are very meddlesome boarders, and, comparing them with Mag, I care no more for them than for so many rags, sacks, and bottles.

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